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## **The Vitalizing Sea: Embodiment and wellbeing on a sea-kayak journey**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore interconnections of outdoor activities and subjective wellbeing by investigating sea-kayaking, dynamic forms of vitality, salutogenesis and Integrated Quality of Life (IQOL). The research was participatory and based on in-depth qualitative interviews, during and after a seven-day sea-kayaking journey. It took place in the Outer Hebrides in Scotland 2018 among a group of six outdoor education undergrad-students. Method: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to identify sea-kayakers lived nature-experiences in an inductive manner. Findings: forms of vitality in the sea-environment, influence embodied sensory perceptions and emotional/affective states. Yet each situation and the responses they cause appear highly subjective. This study suggests that sea-kayaking has vitalizing implications on subjective wellbeing yet experiences also contain ambiguities and negative feelings. The embeddedness in dynamic, ecological connections at sea, however, contains constructive potentials and opportunities for the development of salutogenetic wellbeing.

Keywords: sea-kayaking, wellbeing, salutogenesis, outdoor recreation, dynamic forms of vitality, phenomenology.

## Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the field of qualitative nature-based recreation and health research with a detailed phenomenological study of six sea-kayakers lived-experiences. It investigates *forms of vitality* conceptualized within five aspects of experience: *movement, time, space, force and intention* (Stern 2010, p.4). This concept identifies how the seascape interconnect with internal psychological and embodied experiences, which intensify during the sea-kayak journey. Vitality has been considered a dynamic reflection of wellbeing in outdoor settings (Ryan et al., 2010) and this investigation of forms of vitality or vitality-dynamics, contribute to various fields of outdoor research.

The humanist health perspective in this study offers insights for health professionals, experiential therapist, pedagogues and coaches working with wellbeing or development. It displays the multifaced ways that lived outdoor adventurous activities, interweave with psycho-social and embodied aspects of wellbeing and health. The health related analysis of sea-kayaking alludes to WHO's declaration of holistic health (WHO 1946). It draws specifically on the concept of salutogenesis (Antonovsky 1996), which implies that 'resistance', 'resources' and 'sense of coherence' are important to health and prophylaxis. It also draws on the Integrated Model for Quality of Life (IQOL) identifying humanist and existential health determinants (Ventegodt, Merrick, & Andersen, 2003).

Examining sea-kayakers' wellbeing from these criteria, we acknowledged the need for a critical approach, which capture a complexity of outdoor experiences, containing both positive and negative aspects. This ambiguity may challenge dominant discourses, that outdoor recreational benefits are mainly physical activity, pleasant views or either positive or negative alone. Beyond these preconceptions, we ask how

sea-kayaking influences subjective wellbeing via embodiment and vitality-dynamics, disseminating further spatial qualities of a seascape.

### **Theoretical framing and positioning**

Despite the well-known WHO (1946) statement found the ‘biomedical perspective’ as inadequately conceptualising health decades ago, it is a prevailing discourse in contemporary medicalized healthcare. The complementary theories of Antonovsky (1996) salutogenesis and Integrated Quality of Life (IQOL) Ventegodt et al. (2003) offer a more comprehensive and humanistic perspective on sea-kayakers experiences. These define life-quality not merely by material, objective and biological factors, but acknowledges subjectivity, individual meaningfulness and a range of existential propositions, often eluded by traditional medical practice and Quality of Life measurements.

Outdoor environments have been included in integrated medicines (Mantler & Logan 2015) or in ‘green and blue spaces’ in health strategies which considers humanistic health perspectives (Tredinnick-Rowe, Taylor, and Tuohino 2018). Yet although benefits are provided for the inclusion of environmental and socio-economic policies as public health resources (Mishra et al. 2020), these seem to lack acknowledgement and commitment from health sectors.

Wellbeing and qualities of water have been studied widely across literature. For instance, water is distinctly associated to ‘wellness’ in human history, associated to cultural, ritual, spiritual, healing and providing vitalizing, soothing, relaxing effects (Strang 2005). Vitalizing effects on wellbeing through the presence of natural elements, has been studied but is not so well researched (Ryan et al., 2010).

Yet, the way in which nature in western discourse has reflected dualist, individualized, romanticised ideas (Roberts 2011) seems sometimes uncritically reflected in green and blue spaces research (Mcphie and Dykes 2016). As Rogan, O'Connor & Horwitz (2005) recognized, both built or natural spaces are connected to social and cultural meanings. They involve complex and intimate human engagement with environments, which are more than mere backdrops for experience.

The sea involves profound sensory involvement, embodiment and qualities of place which links to cultural and social values. Immersion with the sea, for instance may be centrally represented in contemporary cultures ideas of unconstrained or objectified space:

‘(...)A yearning to float free in a liquid world of non-linear time, heightened sense perceptions and infinitely subtle communications, as opposed to everyday world of divided time, building blocks, sequential language and objectification which we must negotiate with our awkward, upright, two-legged stance.’(Toop 2018, p. 271)

These perspectives may not be adequately captured in current discourses in outdoor research, where physical activity and pleasant views are dominant concept linked to health prevention, restoration, stress-decrease (Foley & Kistemann 2015; Westfalenlippe 2011).

### *Embodiment and the outdoor experience*

A range of seminal psychological outdoor studies on human responses and affordances (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Gibson 1986; Tuan 1977) are often underpinning outdoor research, yet these are methodologically and theoretically less considerate of the body. Embodied phenomenology attends to the knowing body, humanism, the integration of the self and the physical worlds. Paterson's (2009) perspectives on haptic knowledges and sensuous disposition representing a being-in-the-world, however have been emerging in some outdoor recreation studies. For instance Couper's (2018)

perspective on spatialities of being and Allen-Collinson & Leledaki's (2015) exploration of sensory phenomenology in outdoors leisure studies. According to Dykes & Miles (2018) the rhythm of movement and speed are unique sensations in a kayak that comprises a distinctive shared embodiment. Also, sea-kayaking involve experiential and embodied skills development, including ecological, geographical, and technical competence, which were part of Inuit cultures originally (Whitridge 2004 p.221).

Brown & Humberstone (2015) emphasized the corporeal, sentient, more-than-representational ways to explore characteristics of sea-based forms of outdoor recreation. They also highlight the body's involvement in 'kinetic empathy', as a potentially strong indicator of sensory-attunement and wellbeing. Considering the seascape as 'a mobile living energy a phenomenological part of being and becoming' (p. 188), may bring out contextual representations of sensory experiences in sea-kayaking 'beyond words' that would otherwise difficult to express comprehensibly (Pink 2009).

Forms of vitality (Stern 2010 p. 45) may deepen some relevant conceptual aspects of how body and self is dynamically involved in vitalization via intersubjectivity during sea-kayaking. Forms of vitality defined as *movement, time, force, space and intention/intentionality* are part of the lived space in sea-based recreation that highly shape experiences. They can for instance be recognized by descriptive terms like accelerating, fading, fleeting, weak, pushing, floating, relaxing, tense, pulsing, pulling, bursting, disappearing and so forth. Dynamical forms of vitality are thus closely related to the emotions that accompanies them, but are more precisely "the felt experience of force, in movement, with the temporal contour, and sense of aliveness going somewhere"(Stern 2010 p. 12).

The vitalizing dynamics at sea implies a space which is more than a fixed background-setting in which objective 'health benefits' are disconnectedly harnessed. Revisiting the health discursive implications of this study, as Chavez et al. (2005) and Mason and Holt (2012) pointed out wellbeing, is often used indifferent across health research-disciplines. Objectivist and bio-medical approaches tend to confine health to certain predefined criteria, which may not be compatible with integrative humanist approach, acknowledging human subjectivity, personhood, and lifeworld. This may reflect fundamental differences in health discourses amongst outdoor adventure research. For instance, previous studies linking adventurous experiences in outdoor spaces to psycho-social and existential aspects of health and wellbeing rather than to fixed objectivist criteria (Kyriakopoulos 2011; Clough et al. 2016; Varley 2011) or 'health imperatives' (Willig 2008).

Enabling factors to health according to Antonovsky are those that foster 'resistance', 'resources' and 'sense of coherence' (SOC). Where the SOC involves comprehensibility (cognitive), manageability (behavioural) and meaningfulness (emotional/spiritual). The IQOL by Ventegodt et al. (2003) similarly maintains that psychological and existential depth is required in conceptualising health and in research. It comprises both (1) subjective, (2) existential, and (3) objective determinants of life-quality, and thus argues, that a humility and respect for the richness and complexity of life is required. Humanist psychologist recognize that living authentically and seizing the full possibilities of being a person are primary sources of meaning. Also that emotional intelligence is a prerequisite for this ability (Ryff and Singer 2008). Goleman's (2004) influential work on emotional intelligence established, that emotions are involved in the development of insight and excellence. Embodied experiences

furthermore are seen to influence the integration of knowledge, self-reflection, or the development of wellbeing (Johnson 2013).

These insights are central in the current examination and principally humanistic health perspectives. Nonetheless it remains important to address rising levels of mental illness and lifestyle diseases holistically (WHO Regional Office for Europe 2013).

Insights of vitality may expand on the current understanding in outdoor health research of the role embodiment and the dynamics of environments.

## **Methodologies and Methods**

### *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*

The analysis of sea-kayakers' lived experiences is based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as elaborated by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014). IPA is a qualitative and inductive approach that lets the researcher investigate how the participants freely express themselves. This seeks to avoid monitoring the research of health, based on predefined behavioral or cognitive categories and models. Rather, IPA allows the researchers to capture important details of the individuals' lifeworld, context and spatial characteristics.

IPA creates the opportunity to investigate the knowledge of sea-kayakers' lifeworld, their meanings and understandings of wellbeing. It is primarily committed to the rigorous analysis of cases and personhood rather than jumping to generalizations or claims for larger populations. It attempts to explore personal experiences perceptions of a given object or event and identify patterns of meaning. IPA may illuminate the embodied personal experience in the context of meaning, relationships, and the lived world and as connected to Merleau-Pontian (1945) body-phenomenology. This explores how lived perceptions of the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962) emerges in conscious



perceptions. Body-phenomenology thus, can give voice to the corporeal and sensory realm of sea-kayakers' subjective experiences, which may express a body-mind-world-unity, or elaborate on experiences of 'knowledge, being, and time' (Heidegger 1996).

The outdoor context of sea-kayaking furthermore relates to eco-phenomenology. Thomson (2004) suggest, that eco-phenomenology's positive project seeks to restore meaning to the term the post-modern relationship to the environment. Eco-phenomenologists he argues, hope to undercut and replace the conceptual roots of environmental crisis with ethical and metaphysical principles of environmental philosophy. There are however two distinguished forms, a transcendental or naturalistic ethical realism, respectively. Thomson (2004) maintains that, the transcendental realism can bring about a new understanding of our place in our world, by means of experience rather than ethical facts. Alluding to 'the power of experience' may emphasize akin to Lund's (2005 p.30) examination, that involvement and experience often come prior to any objectification taking place:

"Our lives are not always lived in objectified bodies, for our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that end in objectification."(Csordas, 1994. p. 7).

### *The Research Context*

The sea-kayak journey was seven days and took place in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, July 2018. The group was nine kayakers in total, including six undergraduate outdoor students, two certified tutors and the first author of this paper. There were a mixed level of expertise and skills with some being relatively novice at open sea and others more experienced and had undertaken multiday expeditions. The group departed from South Uist and crossed open sea towards the Island of Barra. The journey then was carried out along the east coast, and for some the west coast. The average distance travelled was approximately between 35-40 km. The remote and exposed location of the

Outer Hebrides and Island of Barra is a potentially challenging, but also interesting destination for exploration by sea-kayak. The west coast of Barra is facing North Atlantic swell and has a more rugged coastline. On both the west and east coast caves were entered only accessible from the seaside. The varied conditions allowed adjusting level of challenge on the journey and the group chose to split the group for two days to make room for differentiation. The entire group joined up again in Castle Bay and continued the rest of the journey together.

The sea conditions varied tremendously depending on the weather, and the group encountered a variety of sea states. The exposure to the western seaboard or the shelter in the lee of the main island groups of the Outer Hebrides. As a general principle, we concerned ourselves with force four and five winds, any stronger was considered too much.

The trip was a part of the university's up-skill programme and was facilitated with an Experiential Learning approach (Roberts 2011). This sea kayaking journey had no specific learning goals and not a specific part of a curriculum. Students learned from experience and it was an emergent process. Participants, undergraduates, volunteered to join the concept of undertaking a journey by sea kayak to perhaps; develop their skills, further their knowledge of the places they might visit and to have a fun time. The experience was facilitated to place the students at the centre of the decision-making process. Notwithstanding the challenges (Thomas 2010), this was to allow the students to have autonomy and to be empowered to make consequential decisions for future learning.

The experiential learning of the participants is reflected in many experiential aspects of the journey. The emphasis on letting students explore for them-selves and together what the learning on the kayak-trip may be for them, was facilitated with group

gatherings. In this context the mentors stirred reflections about the day, relating to their learning, task solving, upcoming decisions about the journey etc. The experiences of each day or part of day, informed the key decisions for the next experience, what might have been goals or points to learn. Emerging from this process was a decision to circumnavigate islands or island groups. Two experienced sea kayaking staff offered advice and knowledge to further inform the students decisions, they also provided safety cover. As much as possible the students were autonomous, deciding how far to go, where to camp and what degree of exposure they wanted.

At one point in the experience, it was decided to split the group to allow for different desires and experiences. The students chose which experience they preferred. Those participants keen to journeying along the west coast, experienced the open North Atlantic Ocean and more challenging wave conditions. This group was experiencing mixed experiences, seasickness, drownophobia and challenging beach landings. The other group in more sheltered waters of the east coast, bays of islands had more accessible sand beaches for landings, but were challenged by tidal, current and wind conditions. The students chose the focus of their learning, whether that be on technical skills/ challenges, exploring the coast or observing the sea life. Experiences were in that sense tailored by the students to meet their needs. Most students encountered a “stretch” state (Brown 2008), where the waves and wind created challenges to which the students had mixed responses. These experiences were useful to inform their future planning and aspirations. Sometimes “stretch” was to be avoided, sometimes to be sought. Students were encouraged to keep diaries and they were brought to daily discussions to allow the experience to be evaluated in situ.

In this paper, we suggest some possible ways that this experiential learning approach influences the development of wellbeing. It is beyond the scope of this paper however, to discuss this in detail.

### *Qualitative Interviews*

Qualitative Interviews followed a semi structured interview protocol based on the Standardized Open-Ended Interview approach (Turner 2010; first authour). The strength of this approach is that it allows the participants to fully express their viewpoints and experiences with minimal influence of the researcher's bias. One challenge is that participants do not always talk about the phenomena under investigation. Despite the attempt to bracket presumptions, interviews were carried out with a certain level of anticipation of the research topic under investigation.

The interviewed students were 3 male and 3 females, aged 18-23, and interviews lasted between 20-35 mins. They were asked to report their most positive and challenging experiences. The word 'wellbeing' was not used in the questioning to avoid 'putting words in the mouth' of the participant, but to let the experiences emerge by the participants themselves. From the interviews, themes and sub-themes were inductively developed into a rich dataset, addressing how their experiences informed their wellbeing.

Braun and Clarke (2006) demarcated six steps that embrace the approach theoretically and methodologically; (1) the data were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were read a re-read to familiarize with the content; (2) interesting features of the data were identified systematically by generating codes across the dataset; (3) codes were collected into potential themes; (4) a thematic map was developed whereby the coded data, themes, and subthemes were compared within and between each set of categories to get an overview; (5) each theme was further refined in relation to the

analytic context, where clear definitions and names were derived. This process sought to shed light the defined themes in relation to the research questions; (6) finally followed by writing up the thematic accounts based upon vignettes. The selection of vignettes aims to give the participants a voice, and intends to provide vivid, authentic and compelling examples, addressing the research question.

### *Ethnography and sensory ethnography*

Besides interviews, data were gained through field-research and ethnographic inspired analysis of the first researcher's lifeworld. To argument and extend the research, there are excerpts from the first researcher's diary. The use of emplaced or sensory ethnography (Pink 2015) makes use of the sensory involvement and intersubjectivity of experiences as a source of knowledge. It was considered that the use of descriptive accounts of sensory experiences, thoughts, and reflections could discern aspects of the data-collection that were uniquely linked to context, space and place.

The general field observations were obtained from notetaking, diary, and conversations. When using ethnographic method and reflexivity Hobbs (1993) asserted that the researcher is part of the social world which is studied, and contain a set of effects of the researcher. This was considered in the research process. Informed consent and data protection measures were integrated in all methods.

### *First Author's reflexivity of the field experiences*

By being aware of the possible research biases and preconceptions that could influence participants journey, there was a careful consideration not to impose these onto others. As a principle, we contended to Bruyn's (1966) suggestion that participant-observers should to be interested in people as they are, not as they think they ought to be as some standard of his own. Several themes related to how the researcher's

experiences could be seen to potentially influence their experience or in the interview. However, it was perceived that being there, provided a level of knowns or a mutual point of reference to the many shared experiences, to talk about and explore some aspects in more detail. Where it seems a possible limitation that participants did not so easily share vulnerability or struggles during the interviews, it is also possible that the positive aspects may simply have felt more important or were more easily remembered at the time of the interview. Considerable challenges were associated with describing sensations or the sensory experiences, that participants often found hard to recall or express. For instance:

Michelle: ‘(...) When I’m in that sort of environment where it’s just me in a boat at the sea, ehm, I just find it kind of like, I just feel very content, like I don’t know what it is (...)you kind of just go with the waves, just.. I feel very calm all of a sudden, I can’t describe it, there is no worry, it’s just like no worry.’

Yet, it is possible to discern aspects of sea-kayakers positive and enjoyable experiences in a broad experiential sense. Whilst inductive inquiry allows an open and unconstrained exploration of participants life-worlds, movements, and experiences, findings from this study may not be generalizable. We consider however, that including the diversity of themes in the health-related analysis is important, to help create a better understanding of the complexity of outdoor recreation phenomena in the future research. The following analysis ensued three consecutive main themes; ‘the seascape, wellbeing and vitality’, ‘embodiment and wholeness of experience’ and ‘ecological awareness and self-reflection’.

## Analysis

### *The Seascape, wellbeing and vitality*

The sea involves dynamic encounters which influence experience and wellbeing. Changing *forces* in the sea-environment such as waves, shifting winds and tides are at times powerful, at other times subtle and gentle energies felt to be soothing, calming atmospheres. These opposites require the students to embrace both strength and weakness, positive and negatives, excitement and joy, challenge, fear and hardship. The embodied and psychological responses to dynamic experiences represent according to Stern (2010), psychic forces and counterforces, which contains developmental implications. At sea, there are both productive/counterproductive forces and thus sea-kayaking contains ambiguous effects to wellbeing. A range of examples following, demonstrates how dynamic, two-sided but often complementary experiences emerge during sea-kayaking:

Carl: 'Yeh, there is two sides of it. There is the awesome side, which is when you get the big waves and you are getting thrown about (...) It's the excitement, it's the adrenalin, I love that part. but I also love the quiet and calm and looking about and that.'

The contrast and variety, the total calm of the sea to the wild tall waves, is a part of sea-kayaking that several participants relate to as a positive:

Peter: 'When it was a bit bouncy and rough... On the last day... it was a little bit of a rush, a bit sketchy. I like that. Just crashing through the waves and water and that, I like just the excitement of it (...).'

At sea the spatial dynamics of *movement* are in constant change, fluid and to some extent unpredictable. The contrasts at sea are large, and both challenging forces at sea are perceived enjoyable, as are calm pleasant moments. Subjective perception of the circumstances however varies:

Bob: 'The water sucks, I don't trust it, it didn't move properly you can't predict it properly (...) I'm not from the sea so I have a natural distrust towards it.'

The perception of fluidity and inability to predict movements in this example, seems to produce negative feelings, lack of control and manageability. The combination of skills, trust or a lack thereof, combined with each individual's ability to handle a variety of circumstances produce positive/negative emotions. The element shift going from land to the sea reflects an important spatial-psychological change from relative stability into a fluid environment of flexibility, insecurity and total immersion, until the next landing.

Vitalising effects of the element of water are reflected in sea-kayaker's feelings of being alive or interacting with their sensuous capabilities and responsiveness to deal with various aspects of journeying in a fluid, changeable open sea:

Maria: I find the sea so calming(...) I think it is like the rocking, and like the little movements stuff and the waves and the like blue of the sea, and I love it when the sea is really clear and you can see the bottom and there is a whole like, other world you know what I mean (...).'

Michelle: '(...) When I'm in that sort of environment where it's just me in a boat at the sea, eh, I just find it kind of like, I just feel very content, like I don't know what it is (...)you kind of just go with the waves, just.. I feel very calm all of a sudden, I can't describe it, there is no worry, it's just like no worry.'

Brown & Humberstone (2015) suggest that, the openness and sense of freedom at the sea is reflected in individual and collective meanings. This may be seen where participants report positive, uplifting, freeing, appreciative and calming moments:

Camilla: '(...) you can look out at sea and there is nothing, it's just a line, I like that (laughs). (...) thinking about the world, how big it is, how much there is, I don't know, it just goes on.'

Michelle: '(...) you don't get to see that a lot, you just see nothing but the ocean around I just think that a quite calming view to see. (...) I think a lot of people it might find it quite intimidating cause you feel very small when you are out at the sea (...), I find it quite, eh, just freeing (...).'

According to Bollnow (2011) a distinct feelings of endless space, vulnerability, or a 'sense of expanse' is part of nature atmospheres, that can impact the individuals entire sense of possibility and feeling of freedom, corresponding to a sense of inner expanse, an ultimately uplifting experience (p.87). Whilst this uplifting phenomenon of atmosphere may appear, there are other aspects such as sensing the natural soundscapes



and embodied movement of the sea- or landscapes, that seems influential to positive emotional responses, for example:

Michelle: ‘(...) I think especially when you are in those open spaces, (...) it’s very few sounds but they make like quite a lot all together. Cause you can’t hear like traffic (...) or anything like that, you get to focus on all the little tiny sounds, like the birds and the seals.’

Soundscapes such as waves crashing on cliffs and tiny sounds of birds and seals bring about pleasant emotional and sensory, perhaps energetic responses. According to Böhme’s (2000) insights on nature atmospheres and Vollmar’s (2004) analysis on ecological soundscape, these may facilitate rediscovery of sensory and emotional capabilities.

The *space* often expressed as ‘felt to be wide open’, seemed to impact feelings of calm, head space or respite, freedom, escape and discharge of stressors and worries of everyday life. Both waves, kayak and body moment in numerous planes and the openness of the seascape seem to expand both the outer and the personal inner sense of space, movement, exploration, experience and reflection. These sensory involvements’ in the seascape for instance, create feelings of calm, freedom, vitality or aliveness. However, this seems somewhat also constrained by the kayak and individual’s skills and ability to manage the shifting environment.

The Outer Hebrides as a remote part of Scotland is an island-landscape and environment that offers the participants an opportunity to engage with and explore rural seascapes not common in everyday life. Remote camping and outdoor cooking, engaging with rural cultural life, pub visits in South Uist, arts and crafts, wildlife and natural life:

Peter: ‘It kinds of bundles everything I like about the outdoors. (...) I love camping hiking, navigating everything like that, (...) the sea as well, it kind of chucks everything like that together, like seeing all those little remote places.’

Sea-kayaking also provided appreciation of life, as another example reflected:

Camilla: 'Yeh, I consider it (sea-kayaking) important, (...) it makes me think that I have chosen the right path in life and I would like to continue to do this more in the future. (...) (...) it makes me feel good. It makes me appreciate life.'

Various accounts make it clear that many different personal motives and intentions were involved and comprises a range of participant/professional *internationalities*. Paddling around the various islands for seven days, was not driven by hunt for food for survival, but by educational and recreational interest to explore islands, nature, sea-life, gaining outdoor skills, and to socialize in an adventurous lifestyle.

### *Embodiment – the wholeness of experience*

Embodiment and dynamic movements during sea-kayaking, influence the individual world and wellbeing. Corporeality brings awareness to the body, perceived movements, sensations, the felt level of capacities and energy. The emergence of corporeality to the self, happens when movements of the body and being in the kayak become conscious. This is evoked by feelings of the waves rocking gently, gliding through calm water, paddling in the rough forceful waves up and down, or tides and winds.

There are often 'mixed and ambiguous feelings' occurring, which suggest that positive feelings co-exist with challenging and at times negative emotions:

Camilla: '(...) I guess I was better than I thought I would be (...) I didn't want to fall behind so I just always tried to keep up (...) I think I worried more before-hand than I actually did on the water.'

Maria: 'I think there was a couple of times when I knew the paddling would be pretty intense, the crossings yeh, when my shoulder was hurting and my legs were numb, and I'd hurt my elbow as well, I didn't know if I would be able to actually do it, but I was fine in the end (...).'

Experiences like this suggest, how challenges by participants were often followed by sense of accomplishment and reward. An easy, comfortable calm sea is enjoyable, but rapid changes in weather and wave conditions stretches people's comfort zone:

Bob: '(...) when we were in very, very rough weather and very tall waves that was very stressful and I didn't like it. (...) Well, it could have gone a lot worse (...) I stayed close to Peter 'cause I know he can swim'

Researcher: 'At a stage of continuous vomiting and I realized that I was at a point of no return. (...) I could not seem to recover momentum nor physically or mentally due to seasickness. (...) Later these 'survival' dimensions of the journey, confronting the unpredictability and forces of the sea, became a reminder of the little things in life that matter. These then seemed to become more valued and joyful.'

Commitment through challenge are ubiquitous to overcome mental or physical constraints, and to personal development and resilience. Being at sea and actually 'doing it' were seen to elude negative thoughts, self-doubt, fears and anxious anticipations. The contrasts and ambivalence between conditions highlight both rewarding and severely stressful moments.

A range of accounts seem to suggest how sea-kayaking can create a space of respite, allowing an unconstrained sensation of being-in-the-world. 'Being in the world' according to Heidegger (1996) relates to our directedness and intentionality's with the available knowledges of being we possess. In the same way that, diving opens up a certain phenomenological underwater universe, of movements and sensations (Merchant 2011) or sailing certain embodied spatiality's of being (Couper, 2018), sea-kayaking may facilitate other states of being. Varley (2011) highlighted the liminal quality of sea-kayaking experiences as chiefly countercultural and deeply reinvigorating. Miles & Wattchow (2015) similarly asserts, that the departure from the land and return, marks an important spatial-psychological change. A different state of being thus may exist when in communion with the sea, than on land.

Involvement of vestibular sensations in numerous planes, is for instance why sea-kayaking may enable people with spinal cord injuries (Taylor & McGruder's 1996), or that water-based recreation are inclusive spaces to bodies of difference (Foley & Kistemann 2015). However, other aspects of being on an adventurous journey also seem to influence perceptions on 'time, being and knowledge'. Such as a distance to ordinary

life, a different way of attending to time and space (Becker 2015), which seem to offer participants opportunities dwell, reflect, being explorative and to expand on embodied knowledges:

Peter: 'I just think it's just good sea-kayaking. I feel like... definitely good for your health and well-being. Especially in terms of (...) it gets you time to clear your head. Not even clear you head, like you don't even have anything going on, it's just kind of, it just takes you a bit out of normal life (...) And, it's just nice to live in that moment and just appreciate what you do, you know.'

A space to pause, enjoy the moment, may provide new insight or perspectives to emerge:

Peter: 'I enjoyed it all a lot, but there were moments where you just stop and sit and think. Time to process. A bit of time to process everything, (...) just a little bit of space you know. Everything kind of stops and you just think, ah this is sweet.'

According to (Becker 2013 p.16) the adventurous journey involves a change in time perception, where time is determined by concrete experiences and rhythms of nature dictates the course of events rather than linear clock-time. *Time* seem to be perceived as cyclical and processual rather than linear and clockwise, when participants report 'time standing still', following the rhythms of the sea, their bodies in action. Such distance in space and time away from stressors, seems to provide an opportunity for a participant to feel calm:

Michelle: 'I think I can see it being a bit of an escape, yeh. (...) you can just go out into the sea and kind of get perspective again and feel calmer again, like when you're feeling very stressed and like everything is getting on top of you, (...) it's just good to get out of those situations and like just kind of clear your head, just get everything back together.'

In a developmental sense sea-kayaking may thus negotiate time and individual agency differently. As a way of being-in-the-world, this may enhance or develop ways of being, such as being calm or becoming more curious or explorative:

Carl: 'It's the environment being there and me wanting to find all its' little secrets, (...) it's a two-way interaction, it always is. Yeh, it's me looking out at little nooks and crannies and seeing what it's trying to hide.'

This opportunity of combining exploration and curiosity describes a distinct quality of sea-kayaking and the seascape:

Carl: 'It would be completely different if it was a sterile environment (...) (with) nothing to see, nothing to explore nothing to find. It would just be putting the paddling strokes in, yeh it's the diversity of the environment.'

Sea-kayaking seems to involve a degree of freedom beneficial for world and self-exploration. This however may require an experiential learning approach, to allow flexibility, reflective practice and participant freedom. For instance, that required skills for journeying safely, monitoring weather and tidal movements, reading maps and making a bearing and navigating becomes integrated and embodied part of the journey.

### *Ecological Awareness and Self-Reflection*

Empathy and empathetic connections is an emotional form of intelligence that was described by sea-kayakers, about relationships of self, others and the world (Barbara Humberstone 2013; Gruenewald 2008):

Camilla: 'Yeh, because you're in it, like when you see seals and things like that (...) I look at all that and I think is beautiful and I want to keep it like that I don't want to destroy it (...) it makes you appreciate it lots more (...)'

Gruenewald (2008) (p. 317) argues that ecological reinhabitation can be empowering and increase consciousness of place. From the experience of the researcher, kayaking felt to provide a profound immersion and connection:

Researcher: 'The movements through the water was felt immediately as powerful forces. Shapes of shells, crabs and seaweed, the many shades of blue caught the eye (...) but only fraction of what would be there in this huge world underneath. The smell of salty sea and air, seaweed and something indescribable. It seems now more clearly comprehended hoe this big blue beyond pleasantness contains knowledge that is lived.'

Experiences of the sea were by many participants linked to a concern for the environment:

Michelle: 'I think we were quite lucky with the beaches and places that we camped cause they were all like very clean and the water was very clear (...)'

but on one camp site there was quite a lot of just random stuff floating around (...)'Yeh, you don't want to ruin such nice beaches.'

This parallels with other studies that express similar attitudes (Gurholt 2014; Dykes and Miles 2018; Miles and Wattchow 2015), suggesting that outdoor experiences like sea-kayaking, can be a powerful experiential tool in environmental education and for self-exploration:

Carl: '(...) a lot a lot of buoys and fishing nets which are dragged out, plastic lots of bottles, lot of stuff out there (...) but it's nothing different to me than to see plastic and rubbish in a park, it just shows that it is an issue all around.'

Possibly, engagements with the sea reaffirms that both the quality of the environment and ecological-aesthetics (Böhme 1993), is mutually linked to well-being and the quality of experience. Although there is no indication directly that participants feel unwell in the presence of litter or polluting fish farms, they sense and recognize the negative impacts these may have because of being there themselves:

Maria: '(...) I think being on the sea, kind of reaffirms what I already know (...) seeing all the fish farms as well makes me sure of the reasons that I turned vegan.'

Maria: 'I think it is very hard in a lot of outdoor sports to find somewhere where you feel like that (...) Everest which is supposed to be the biggest and hardest mountains to climb, still it is completely littered from the thousands of people (...) It (sea-kayaking) feels a lot more clean in a way, more pure. This week I've had a lot more interest in the sea, I think, it really does intrigue me (...).'

Littering issues reflect the way in which many contemporary adventurous in 'hyped destinations' have become unsustainable due to the mass tourism (Musa, Higham, and Thompson-Carr 2015). The Outer Hebrides as 'wild places' explored by sea-kayak are distant from urban areas or mass tourism sites, seems comparably traceless and untouched. This was important to most participants. Wilderness sea-kayaking although suggested as a relative sustainable practice (Irving Oxley and Brown 2003), that does not create lasting alterations to environments, may be an issue to consider in future outdoor recreation research.

## Discussion

The main research question of this study asks how vitality-dynamics express them-selves in sea-kayaking, and influence on wellbeing? Dynamical forms of vitality may reflect central aspects of how emerging feelings of aliveness, meaningfulness, change, development and embodied learning is facilitated at sea. Although these experiences are not easily accounted for verbally, they may be recognizable in embodied sensations and in the forms of vitality. For instance, in multi-sensory responses like; seeing, hearing, sensing, energies, movements or ecological atmospheres and resultant psychological impacts.

For instance, psycho-dynamic changes seem to appear when the ‘calm rocking sea’ is reported as soothing and uplifting, counteractive effect to stress in everyday life or to provide a respite full space and time. Blissful contemplative moments seem to emerge at sea, both due to embodiment and the connection of internal and open-wide outside worlds providing ‘inner expansions of space’. Yet clearly, despite bliss, confronting challenge, pain and negative emotional experiences was also part of this sea-kayaking journey. Being cold, wet sea-sick, being fearful, having physical pain, exhaustion also seemed counter-facilitative to wellbeing. It could be argued that ‘stretch’ of participants capabilities, skills and mastery, involvement of physical and emotional resilience(M. Brown 2008), provide personal development, perspective and meaning to life in any case. This may also reflect the mixed feelings of sublimity that Becker asserted are part of individuals search for authenticity in adventurous endeavours(Becker et al. 2003).

Experiential learning approach contains a range of potentials to accommodate different needs fulfilment, interest and skill levels. It seems obvious that both learning and subjective wellbeing will depend on the quality of these experiences. It is

considered that the considerable openness, flexibility, reflexivity and responsibility allowed by this approach, provides freedom and autonomy but also involvement in decision-making. It practices the ability to reflect on and communicate needs, find ways to cope, manage stress and challenge. Group gatherings facilitating reflections engages individual processing on what is learned and may develop their emotional and social intelligences in due course.

Importantly sea-kayaking facilitate wellbeing or development differently from other contexts of 'normal life' in a number of ways. Challenge and contradictions for instance is as an unavoidable existential human condition yet is likely felt more intensely at sea. Corresponding to the concepts of salutogenesis and IQOL the engagement with these premises are likely to be intensified. The co-existence of dramatic, uncomfortable or critical situations, alter the need to cope, find strength, confront both resources and weaknesses. Personal struggles of wellbeing in everyday life may be temporarily diminished or put into perspective. When life is turned up-side down (sometimes literally) perceptions are influenced differently, which may provide benefits depending on the situation and the individual context.

This seems related to form of vitality and immersion but also liminal qualities of the sea which has been well described (Varley 2011; Miles and Wattachow 2015). It seems possible that dynamic forces in motion, energy and power represent forces or counter forces at sea, thus facilitate developmental processes and expand personal capabilities differently. This represents perhaps a central part of the seascape as a corporeal, sentient, living energy becomes part of 'being and becoming' (Brown & Humberstone 2015).

It is an interesting question to what extend sea-kayaking may share similarities with other sea-based activities. For instance, to inform future salutogenetic or integrated



health strategies how sea-based activities contribute. The identified qualities of forms of vitality at sea, are likely relate to other forms of shared sea-embodiments than sea-kayaking.

Beyond personal development and potentials to enhance participants wellbeing, sea-kayaking journey seems to influence ecological awareness and connectedness, as Gruenewald (2008) suggested. It may be that because sea-kayaking uniquely provides lengthy embodied immersion with the sea, a more profound understanding of the huamn interconnectedness with the sea-environment is possible. Thomson's (2004) insights on eco-phenomenology and the trancendental persepctive of lived experience and mind-body-word unity, may be a valuable persepctive to explore emerging types of embodied ecological connections or lived experiences in future outdoor research.

## **Conclusion**

This research examined how sea-kayaking influenced subjective wellbeing and considered the effects of embodiment and forms of vitality conceptualized as: movement, time, space, force and intention. Sea-kayaking is an adventurous endeavor that engages with these various forms of vitality at sea. Dynamic forms of vitality experienced corporeally may be hard to articulate and also contain contradictions. The partial immersion with the sea evokes ‘dynamics of touch and movement’ connects emotional/affective states, sensory/bodily experiences, the self and surroundings profoundly. These dynamics are varied and contrasting, but nonetheless the same elements are having different influences on the sea kayakers emerging states of wellbeing.

The sea evokes positive sensory capabilities, moods and vitality, often expressed as subjectively meaningful experiences by participants. Yet, whilst the seascape opens

the ability to feel good about life and self, at other times it narrows or oppresses the sense of possibilities and wellbeing. Embracing contradictions during sea-kayaking adventure, nonetheless, can be empowering to the realization of life quality, because 'feeling alive' is a quality in itself. But also, because it may improve the ability to cope with future, challenging situations resourcefully and resiliently in other aspects of life.

The adventurous journey was reminiscent with the salutogenetic health values; resilience, resources, a sense of coherence and IQOL's consideration of meaningfulness. Sizing life's opportunities, emotion and body are central humanistic aspects in the development of wellbeing amongst sea-kayakers in this study. There are, furthermore, indications that participants' ecological empathy is empowered. Thus, besides sea-kayaking it-self, other aspects of the journey and the qualities of place, space and the environment also impacted wellbeing. Importantly subjective perceptions differ, why emerging feelings and effects linked to vitality cannot be generalized for all.

Adventurous journeys for the purpose of wellbeing, can be contradictory. It is asserted however, that mixed sea conditions and embodiment of forms of vitality is a quality of sea-based adventurous recreation. Kayakers describe, the satisfaction of becoming well-versed and mastering the interplay of the waves, but also feeling challenged, stressed and out of their comfort zone, cold wet or seasick. These are potential experiences for development and learning. This 'stretch' potential is enhanced due to the dynamics of the vitalizing sea.

We suggest that vitality-dynamics at sea and the inherent ambiguity imply, that sea-kayaking adventures are part of the co-creation of a meaningful adventurous lifestyle, perhaps a salutogenetic culture. The vitalizing sea-experiences may therefore possibly create a new or different history of subjective and sociocultural meanings.

Due to the focus on wellbeing, it is only little discussed to what extend experiential learning may be an important part of developing wellbeing, life-quality, being and becoming. However, to ‘know’ experientially and embody mixed sea conditions, is the reality of being a sea-kayaker, which provides some developmental benefits to meet a diversity of wellbeing and learning needs. Also, that allowing relative open experiences allow emerging mental and embodied states of knowing, that could hardly be achieved from pure rational abstraction or perhaps within more strict didactics.

We conclude that vitality dynamics, immersion and embodiment are key visceral implications to wellbeing, learning from experience, feeling invigorated and alive. Embodiment and forms of vitality at sea may thus provide a sound theoretical contribution in future outdoor research concerned with salutogenesis or holistic wellbeing. It could be interesting to further explore the implications of these connections in future research.

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